

The Transport and General Workers' Union in Leamington Spa

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Abstract

This short article details the little known links between the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) and the Warwickshire town of Leamington Spa, from its formation in 1921 to the post-war activities of its future General Secretary, Jack Jones.

Keywords: Transport and General Workers' Union; Jack Jones; Leamington Spa; labour movement

The Formation of the Transport and General Workers' Union

On 27 September 1921, one hundred and forty delegates from trade unions around the country assembled at Leamington Town Hall to complete their amalgamation as the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU). It was a decisive moment in the history of the British labour movement. The TGWU would go on to become the biggest trade union in the country, advancing workers' rights and industrial relations throughout the twentieth century. It was also central to the representation of the working class in parliamentary politics. In 1947 Prime Minister Clement Attlee proclaimed that: 'No union has contributed more in organised strength, in practical wisdom and in imaginative vision to the success of the Labour Party than the Transport and General Workers' Union' (Taylor, 2000: 102).

Figure 1: The founders of the TGWU outside Leamington Town Hall. Image from *The Record*, October 1921, page 18; Transport and General Workers' Union Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (item 1086/9/1).



The TGWU was the brainchild of Ernest Bevin. As a national leader of one of the many dock worker unions, Bevin was acutely aware of the limits imposed by sectional interests in the labour movement. To prevent employers playing off one group of workers against another, and to extend protection to those unrepresented by a union, Bevin and his allies initiated an ambitious process to amalgamate trade unions across a range of

industries. Eleven of those which balloted their members agreed to dissolve their existing organisations and reconstitute themselves as the TGWU (see **Coates & Topham, 1991**).

Key to their acceptance was the TGWU's innovative 'double structure' which gave occupational groups like dockers, drivers, clerks and vehicle workers the autonomy to deal with matters affecting their particular trade, but was overlaid with area committees that would unite members on a geographical basis and allow the union to speak with a single voice for all the workers it represented (**Bullock, 1960**).

The next stage of amalgamation was to agree on the rules that would govern the TGWU's 320,000 members. For this reason a conference was organised at Leamington Spa, chosen for its central location given that delegates would be attending from all over Britain and Northern Ireland. Ahead of the conference there was a huge consultation exercise whereby the proposed rules were sent to the branches of the amalgamating unions – over 1,000 in total – inviting them to suggest amendments. One of those later adopted at Leamington made 'control of industry by the workers' a guiding object of the TGWU; a socialist principle intended to push the union beyond a sole concern with wages, hours and working conditions and toward a broader transformation of capitalist society (**TGWU Archive, nd**).

It was testament to the design of the constitution and the persuasiveness of Bevin, however, that most of the amendments were relatively minor. The conference proceeded with unanimity and passed off largely without incident. The exception was a fiery debate about how to deal with James Sexton and his union of Liverpool dockers who had apparently accused the incipient TGWU of poaching members. Halfway through the conference, the chair Harry Gosling was thus dispatched to meet Sexton and resolve the dispute.

Gosling resumed his duties the following day with an agreement to pause the TGWU's recruitment drive among Liverpool dock workers on the condition that they would be re-balloted and asked again to join the new union. What only became known later was that Bevin had suppressed publication of the verbatim proceedings of the Leamington Conference, unheard of at the time, because he feared the derogatory statements made about Sexton and his Merseyside members would jeopardise the ballot. His tactic proved successful. The Liverpool dockers chose to amalgamate with the TGWU the following year; one of many unions that would join the TGWU over its lifetime (**Coates & Topham, 1991**).

The TGWU conference also resonated with local concerns. During the three-day meeting unemployed people from across the district gathered

outside the Town Hall, where, according to the local newspaper correspondent, 'Labour Party propaganda speeches' were given by conference attendees (**Leamington Spa Courier, 1921a**). A central theme was the disconnect of establishment politicians and the 'idle rich' from the realities of poverty. The speakers called for 'peaceful agitation' to persuade those in power, nationally and locally, to help shoulder the responsibility for relieving economic misery (**Ibid.**).

This was indeed a desperate time for workers. Economic recession had pushed national unemployment figures to record highs and in Leamington there were around 700 people out of work (**Leamington Spa Courier, 1921b**). In fact, mid-way through the conference a notice had gone up at the Town Hall stating that the Mayor's distress fund had just been exhausted. The focus of the crowd was on the insufficient poor relief offered by the Warwick Board of Guardians. They were represented in this matter by C. W. Gardner: the first Labour candidate in Leamington to be elected to the Town Council, the County Council, and the Board of Guardians. Addressing the crowd too, Gardner pleaded them for patience while he pushed ahead with their cause (**Ibid.**).

Following the Leamington Conference the TGWU officially came into existence on 1 January 1922. Two years later it led the first national stoppage in the history of the dock industry and in 1926 threw its weight behind the first (and last) general strike in solidarity with the coal miners, though its preference was for negotiation and tangible gains for its members in the first instance. By 1936 following its merger with the Workers' Union representing agricultural and construction labourers it had become the largest union in Britain and soon after the outbreak of war its General Secretary Ernest Bevin was drafted into the cabinet as Minister of Labour. It was during this period that a second chapter in the story of the TGWU in Leamington began to unfold, led by a young trade unionist – a docker from Liverpool as it happened – called Jack Jones.

Jack Jones

In 1939 Jack Jones was appointed as the TGWU District Organiser for Coventry and surrounding Warwickshire area. Under Bevin, the Ministry of Labour's policy was that all firms receiving government contracts must give workplace access to permitted trade union officers. Jones was one of these officers and he used it to try and organise workers at the Imperial Foundry in Leamington, a subsidiary of the Ford Motor Company.

The foundry was described by Jones as 'a dirty and chaotic undertaking' where, despite his permit, he was 'physically thrown out of the foundry by the works police on two occasions' (**Jones, 1986: 57**). Nevertheless, he managed to recruit more people to the union, and when a national

agreement was later reached with Ford to cover their main factory at Dagenham, it was also extended to the Leamington plant.

Figure 2: Jack Jones (bottom right) with fellow trade unionists and executives after signing a deal for a 42½-hour week at the Standard Motor Co., Coventry, 1 July 1946. Image from Jack Jones's personal papers, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.625/17/314).



As part of the Joint Trade Union Committee overseeing the Ford agreement, though, Jones believed that it left little scope for shop floor bargaining. Empowering shop stewards to negotiate on behalf of local members was a key tenet of his industrial relations philosophy and he and others at the foundry lobbied to change the agreement's rules. Despite rebukes from national trade union leaders, they were ultimately successful in this campaign, which he believed contributed significantly to the upturn in unionisation (**Jones, 1986**). As well as being hostile to active trade unionists, the Imperial Foundry was also alleged in letters written to the local newspaper to have placed a 'colour bar' on employment. It was the TGWU that in 1963 helped four men from south Asia to find work there, one of whom was Mota Singh, later the Mayor of Leamington and first Asian elected to Warwickshire County Council (**Jennings, 2016**).

Working in Coventry during the war was dangerous and in 1940 Jones' family home was destroyed by a bomb. His newborn son and wife Evelyn – herself an aero-engine worker and unionist – were evacuated to Offchurch, a village on the outskirts of Leamington. Jones writes obliquely in his autobiography of the tensions between his professional and personal life, noting, for example, how he tried to combine his weekend work in Leamington with family trips to the swimming pool or park, which at least 'made up for some of the lost time in cementing family happiness' (Jones, 1986: 68).

There was certainly plenty to keep him busy. During his sixteen years at Coventry, membership of the district branches grew from around 3,000 to 40,000, covering many factory and transport workers at Leamington. Based on this record, in 1955 Jones was elected as the Midlands Regional Secretary and in 1968 became General Secretary of the whole union. It was under his leadership that the TGWU reached its apogee. With over two million members it was said to be the largest trade union in Europe and Jones himself became a figure of significant political influence. National legislation introduced in the 1970s on pensions, employment protection, and workplace health and safety would all bear his imprint (Taylor, 2000).

At the start of that decade he found time to return to Leamington to commemorate the TGWU's fiftieth anniversary, planting a tree in Jephson Gardens to mark the occasion. The union now no longer exists, having amalgamated to form Unite in 2007; the same year, coincidentally, that the Imperial Foundry closed down. But the tree still stands, a symbolic reminder of the TGWU's roots in Leamington and subsequent growth of the labour movement.

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